

# Pakistan's Moment of Truth

Marco Mezzera

Tensions are on the rise throughout Pakistan. The military has re-launched sweeping campaigns against insurgents, but at what humanitarian price?

## Job Almost Done?

On 31 May 2009, Pakistan's defence secretary announced that the military operation in the Swat valley region would only take a few additional days before reaching a successful completion. Despite words of caution from his military entourage, Syed Athar Ali continued by specifying that only "5% to 10% of the job" remained to be cleared out.<sup>1</sup> As the main city of the Swat district, Mingora, had been formally retaken from the Taliban, the operation was then expected to concentrate on the rural areas around the city. However, as the media had been barred from entering the combat areas since the onset of the military offensive at the end of April, these announcements of an impending military victory could not yet be verified independently.

Recent performances of the Pakistani armed forces in similar counter-insurgency operations did not bode well. One prominent example is provided by the heavy-handed intervention of the army in the Bajaur agency,<sup>2</sup> in the second week of August 2008. That operation had been launched after concerns that this agency had become a haven for militants organising cross-border attacks on the international forces in Afghanistan. Despite the deployment of considerable military means, Bajaur had not yet been declared trouble-free even four months after the beginning of the operation. Up to that moment the military campaign had produced only two visible effects. On the one hand, there had been mounting evidence that the level of violence on

the other side of the Durand Line<sup>3</sup> had been steadily decreasing, with obvious benefits for the coalition forces operating in Afghanistan. But on the other hand, the operation had created the largest exodus of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Pakistan's history, with 550,000 people reportedly leaving the agency.

The drawn-out intervention eventually came to an end in early 2009, with the signing of a peace agreement. That settlement, however, proved to be extremely short-lived, with the Taliban rejecting it soon after and regaining control in most areas outside the regional capital, Khaar. The immense human costs of the confrontation, both in terms of civilian casualties and internal displacement, seemed therefore to be nullified by a sudden return to the *status quo ante bellum* in the agency. The only tangible and lasting consequence of the escalation of the military operations in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), of which Bajaur is one of seven agencies, was a clear backlash in terms of terrorist attacks. The most impressive of these attacks was the suicide bombing that took place at the Marriott Hotel in Islamabad on 20 September 2008, when a truck full of explosives killed at least 53 people and injured more than 260.

## Military Intervention, but at What Price?

Probably also due to the above-described experience of the controversial engagement in the Bajaur agency, the importance of not being



swallowed into a prolonged conflict was immediately evident to most of the state actors involved in the latest military operation, which was launched more than a month ago in the Swat valley. The security forces decided therefore to take no risks and show no hesitations, and, with the support of heavy artillery and aerial back-up, they launched a full-blown offensive against the insurgent forces of the local Taliban leader Maulana Fazlullah.<sup>4</sup>

One month later, this uncompromising military approach seemed to have produced the aimed results, at least according to official statements, but at what cost? At the end of May 2009, UN sources were putting the number of IDPs at an astonishing 2.4 million, drawing comparisons with the displacement produced by the Rwanda genocide 15 years earlier.<sup>5</sup> Once again, though this time in an unprecedented way, the coming into action of the world's seventh largest armed force<sup>6</sup> revealed its dire limitations and dangerous fall-outs when having to deal with an elusive enemy, often deeply entrenched in the social texture of the theater of operation, rather than with a conventional rival army.

The current enormous dislocations of people from Swat and the adjacent districts of Buner and Dir confronts the Pakistani state with two major challenges: a humanitarian one and a security-related one. The humanitarian challenge is mainly represented by the sheer scale of the exodus and by the level of destruction of all sorts of basic

infrastructures in the areas affected by the conflict. To that extent Pakistan's international allies have been prompt to respond to that country's appeals to meet the humanitarian crisis with the necessary means. During a donors' conference that was held in Islamabad on 21 May they promised 224 million U.S. dollars in aid. That money was to be added to the Pakistan central government's own contribution of 500 million rupees (Rs) – equal to about 4.4 million euro –, to which a new pledge of Rs 500 million was added on 31 May.<sup>7</sup>

### Consequences of a Humanitarian Crisis

The security-related challenge is closely interlinked with the humanitarian one. As aptly expressed by Pakistan's Prime Minister Yusuf Raza Gilani at the above-mentioned conference, aid for the displaced would "help in ensuring that the militants don't exploit the vulnerability of the displaced population. We have to win the hearts and minds of the people," he said.<sup>8</sup> About a week later, the first cases of Taliban fighters trying to blend in with the IDPs in order to escape from the conflict areas were registered, with the arrest by the police of 39 suspects.<sup>9</sup>

Yet the emergence of a humanitarian crisis of such huge proportions in terms of the displacement of people has obviously other and more threatening consequences to the stability of an already fragile country such as Pakistan than the hide-and-seek game of a few alleged

[There is a tangible and growing intolerance among the Baluchi in Pakistan regarding the presence of Pashtun refugees from Afghanistan. An Afghan family near the Khyber pass border crossing-point \(Photo: U.S. Army/R.L. Klika\)](#)

Taliban. First of all, the massive and greatly uncontrolled movement of IDPs to adjacent and even more remote areas has indeed the potential to act as a conduit for the spreading of Taliban elements and ideology. Past substantial military operations in the tribal areas, as the already mentioned 2008 operation in the Bajaur agency, have been unmistakably characterised by a spreading of the 'disease' that they were meant to contain and neutralise, to adjacent areas that until then had not been significantly afflicted by Taliban-style militancy. The 'informal' nature of an insurgent movement such as the Taliban, and its strong ethnic-tribal roots, has made it often invisible to external actors, while being very present within the communities where it had established itself. Customary habits to come to the succour of those in trouble have further contributed to its embedding in the surrounding social structures and has facilitated cross-border movements of Taliban fighters, as experienced by NATO troops in Afghanistan as well.

A second potential threat originating from the current crisis is linked to the unavoidable tensions that arise once large (though temporary) resettlement flows take place, putting additional pressure on often already strained local natural resources and basic services, and on existing delicate ethno-religious balances. Pakistan is already familiar with such dynamics, as shown among others by the increasing 'Pashtunisation' of Baluchistan since the Russian invasion of Afghanistan and the subsequent rout of the Taliban at the end of 2001. As a consequence of the various conflict-related tragedies that unfolded in the neighbouring country, the scarcely populated and religiously moderated province has been upset by a considerable flow of Pashtun refugees from Afghanistan. After all, the provincial capital of Quetta served for many years as the other extreme of a sort of umbilical cord feeding the Kandahar-based Taliban regime in Afghanistan. And it is also in Quetta that the family of the current president of Afghanistan, Hamid Karzai, settled down after escaping from the violence of the civil war. More recently, movements of Pashtun from the neighbouring FATA agencies of North and South Waziristan<sup>10</sup> have added to the relocation flows from Afghanistan.

Although quite murky and not supported by undisputable facts and figures, the situation that seems to emerge from the above-mentioned dynamics indicates a growing shift in the province's ethnic balance between the settling Pashtun and the indigenous Baluchi. In 2008 it was estimated that the Baluchi comprised some 40 to 60 per cent of the province's population, while the Pashtun were believed to form between 28 and 50 per cent. "Whatever the real figures, there

is a tangible and growing intolerance among the Baluchi regarding the presence of Pashtun refugees from Afghanistan. The provincial capital, Quetta, is currently believed to have a Pashtun majority, with numbers varying between 800,000 and 1.4 million." And finally, "elements close to the Baluchi nationalist movement believe the 'Talibanization' of the province has enjoyed the support of the state – especially of the military – as a way to weaken the Baluchi national democratic movement."<sup>11</sup>

The impact of the refugees' crisis will not only be felt around the overcrowded camps that have been set up just outside the conflict areas. Although also in this case the numbers tend to strongly differ depending on the source, evidence seems to indicate that only a minority of those displaced by the fighting have been accommodated in camps. An assessment by the Pak Institute for Peace Studies on 19 May 2009 puts that percentage at around 40.<sup>12</sup> More recent estimates tend to correct those figures downwards, around a percentage of 15 to 20. The rest apparently has been spreading thinly across the country, with Punjab and Karachi as favourite destinations.<sup>13</sup> Especially Karachi, the capital city of the Sind province and the industrial hub of the country, could prove to be ill-equipped to sustain increased pressure on its resources and ethnic balance, as the various riots throughout the years seem to indicate.

### Testing the State's True Intentions

Finally, a third potential threat to the stability of the country, which could possibly emerge from the current dislocation crisis, regards the fragility of the relationship keeping the IDPs and the government together. There is little doubt that the ongoing military operation clinching the Lower Dir, Buner and Swat districts has been mainly triggered by the heavy international protests that accompanied a controversial peace deal in the restive Swat valley between the Pakistani government and the Taliban-backed Movement for the Enforcement of Sharia (TNSM). When the deal was closed, at the end of February, many eyebrows were raised in the capital cities of Pakistan's international allies in the global fight against terrorism. The common concern was that, as it had been the case in similar agreements and ceasefires in the recent past, the so-called Malakand Accord would allow the militants to create 'sanctuaries' on Pakistani soil where they could "regroup and intensify their insurgency against Western forces in neighbouring Afghanistan".<sup>14</sup> The concerns were further compounded by the agreement that Islamic sharia law would be enforced in the Swat valley. While the Pakistani government seemed intentioned to postpone indefinitely the signing into law of that specific promise, the threat of the TNSM leader, Sufi Mohammad, to withdraw from the accord caused a sudden acceleration of the legislative process. The parliament thus passed a resolution, on 13 April 2009, introducing sharia courts in the districts of Malakand, Swat, Shangla, Buner, Dir, Chitral, and Kohistan, a region that encompasses more than one-third of the Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP).

*Pakistani performances in counterinsurgency operations do not bode well*



But it was only about 10 days later, when the Taliban moved into the district of Buner, taking over the local administration, that the army moved into action. By coming within a 100 kilometres range from the capital city of Islamabad, the Taliban had crossed a sort of invisible line marking an absolutely no-go area for them.

While the Pakistani population had been left wondering about the real reasons behind the government's indecisiveness or unwillingness to counter the Taliban expansion, the international community had come out with very clear language in reaction to the capitulation of Buner. U.S. Secretary of State Hilary Clinton accused the Pakistani government of "basically abdicating to the Taleban and the extremists" and defined the Taliban menace as an "existential threat posed to the state of Pakistan".<sup>15</sup> In addition, President Barack Obama's pledge, one month earlier, of 7.5 billion dollars in aid over five years, carried the unambiguous condition that cooperation in fighting terrorism was required.

### Which Side Are You on?

It is almost impossible to determine the level of support that the military operation enjoys among the local population living in the Taliban-controlled areas. While it can be safely assumed that no average democracy- and freedom-loving citizen would even be willing to accept a repressive regime as that envisioned by the Taliban,

Pakistan's peculiar situation in terms of state-society relations and internal societal structures requires some level of analytical differentiation.

To begin with, most of those so-called Taliban are more intrinsic to the societies where they operate than the state's formal institutions. Especially in the FATA, traditionally regarded as buffer zones amidst complex geo-strategic balances of power, the central state has been a consistently missing feature of the institutional landscape, with the only exception of irregular and painful military operations. Those areas have long enjoyed a semi-autonomous status, with the tribal leaders exercising virtually complete control of their own internal affairs. Given such a scenario, it is obvious that any state's initiative to regain administrative or military control of these agencies would need to be carefully planned and gradually implemented. An all-out military offensive is probably the worst way of trying to bring back the state into these areas.

In view of the above-described situation of political and therefore also economic marginalisation of the tribal areas, the level of economic attraction exercised by the Taliban, especially upon the local youth, cannot be disregarded. In the specific case of the FATA, according to the 1998 census, these "are the most economically backward areas of Pakistan and some 60 per cent of the population lives below the poverty line".<sup>16</sup> In such an abysmal economic situation, which is certainly

[U.S. humanitarian relief supplies are being transported to Pakistan's Swat valley. Pakistani counterinsurgency operations have caused the largest exodus of internally displaced persons in the country's history \(Photo: U.S. Air Force/S. Weismiller\)](#)

true also for other parts of the NWFP, it is hardly surprising that the circulation of significant amounts of money originating from a whole series of illegal activities and from foreign and domestic donations, can easily master widespread loyalties among the population. Again, the extensive destruction caused by the sort of military operations unleashed in the Swat valley is definitely not the best means to promote economic development.

Furthermore, in a country such as Pakistan, which has been born out of a traumatic process – the partition from India –, where society has witnessed an increased militarisation throughout its relatively short history, and where all sorts of conflicts and violence have been regularly taking place, especially along the border areas with Afghanistan, it should not come as a surprise if the civilian population shows some reluctance in unconditionally embracing the drums of war. Most of those afflicted by the current operations have either themselves already witnessed conflict and violence, or have close relatives and friends who have gone through such painful experiences before. Therefore, they are aware of the kind of losses that are likely to incur once conflict breaks out.

Finally, there is an issue of systemic distrust of the military among the majority of the Pakistani population when it comes to dealing with Islamic militancy. The armed forces' and especially the intelligence services' (ISI) key role in propping up the Taliban resistance to the Soviet army during the 10 years of the Afghanistan war, and their equally central role in supporting religious extremists involved in terrorist operations on the Indian-controlled side of Kashmir, have contributed to the widespread perception that the Taliban and the military are still connected by robust, though invisible, linkages.

Conspiracy theories accompanying any terrorist attack on Pakistani soil are common, whereby the alleged interests of deviated sectors of the security forces are carefully analysed and brought forward. More in general, the conjecture that a country characterised by 37 years of military rule, of the 62 that have passed by since independence, may have some intrinsic interest in maintaining a certain (i.e. manageable) degree of instability, is widely regarded as acceptable.

In the specific case of the latest Swat offensive, but also concerning the Bajaur operation of the previous year, fundamental questions remain as to the strategic approach chosen by the military to deal with the insurgency. Notwithstanding the usual justification that the Pakistani army has been essentially created to engage its arch-

enemy India in a conventional war, it remains hard to believe that its intelligence operations, which have proved to be so effective on foreign territory, are so incredibly lacking when they need to address domestic problems. From the scant witnesses' accounts that emerged from the Swat valley, the impression has indeed been raised that the army has decided to engage an elusive enemy by relying on the use of full-blown military force, rather than on counterinsurgency tactics.

## The Way Forward

In the light of all the previous considerations it appears obvious that the key to Pakistan's future stability or instability lies with its handling of the current refugees' crisis. The Pakistani state has the opportunity to redeem itself from its ambiguous past by achieving a swift and decisive victory over the Taliban of the Swat valley (and eventually also those of Waziristan), but above all by showing to its citizens that it can still fulfil its fundamental functions on their behalf. The state needs to make its presence felt among those suffering, not only through the powerful hand of the security forces, but mainly through the delivery of all the basic services that can bring some relief among the conflict-affected population.

The international community in its turn should make use of the opportunity provided by the sheer scale of the dramatic events in order to 'force' substantial reforms within the governance system that has held hostage the country for so many years. A paradigm shift in the way the country's elites justify their *raison d'être* is needed. Not only the so often relied upon concept of an 'existential threat' on the eastern borders of the country should be profoundly questioned, but also the recently emerging interpretation of that same existential threat as being associated with the presence of domestic religious militants.

The facets and causes of Pakistan's protracted crisis are multiple and should all be properly recognised and dealt with. The origin of such a redemptive process, however, should be based in a genuine attempt to turn Pakistan's formal democracy into a substantive democracy, whereby citizens are truly put in the position to decide the country's destiny regardless of all the patronage, elite, ethnic, tribal, military and religious powers that constantly try to harness the country's governance system.

*A widespread perception is that Taliban and the Pakistani military are connected*

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1. 'Pakistan "Nearing Swat Victory" ', *BBC News*, 31 May 2009.
2. One of the seven agencies (i.e. administrative units) forming the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA).
3. Border established in 1893 and separating Afghanistan from what was then British India (now Pakistan).
4. Son-in-law of Sufi Mohammad, the founder of the *Tehrik e Nifaz e Shariat e Mohammad* (TNSM), a militant movement that had been active in Swat in the mid-1990s.
5. 'UN Decries Refugee Crises in Pakistan', *Press TV*, 26 May 2009.
6. As of 2006, the Pakistan armed forces consisted of approximately 620,000 active personnel, with an additional 300,000 paramilitary forces: Anthony H. Cordesman and Martin Kleiber, *The Asian Conventional Military Balance in 2006: Overview of Major Asian Powers*, 26 June 2006, p. 24, [www.csis.org/media/csis/pubs/060626\\_asia\\_balance\\_powers.pdf](http://www.csis.org/media/csis/pubs/060626_asia_balance_powers.pdf).
7. Syed Irfan Raza, 'President Zardari Allocates Additional Rs500 mn for IDPs', *Dawn.com*, 1 June 2009.
8. Robert Birsel, 'Pakistan's Allies Promise \$224 Million for Displaced', *The Washington Post*, 21 May 2009.
9. Asif Shahzad, 'Police: Taliban Suspects among Pakistani Refugees', *The Washington Post*, 29 May 2009.
10. Mainly due to Pakistani military operations in those agencies, but also to U.S. drone strikes.
11. Marco Mezzera and Safiya Aftab, *Pakistan State-Society Analysis*, Initiative for Peace-building, January 2009, p. 12, at [www.initiativeforpeacebuilding.eu/pdf/Pakistan\\_State\\_Society\\_Analysis.pdf](http://www.initiativeforpeacebuilding.eu/pdf/Pakistan_State_Society_Analysis.pdf).
12. 'Humanitarian Crisis Deepens in Swat', Pak Institute for Peace Studies, 19 May 2009.
13. Michel Moutot, 'Military Victory in Swat not Enough, Experts Warn Pakistan', *Agence France-Presse*, 31 May 2009.
14. Junaid Khan, 'Pakistani Taliban Announce Indefinite Truce in Swat', *Reuters*, 24 February 2009.
15. 'Pakistan Disorder "Global Threat" ', *BBC News*, 23 April 2009.
16. Naveed A. Shinwari, *Understanding FATA: Attitudes towards Governance, Religion & Society in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas, Peshawar (Pakistan): Community Appraisal & Motivation Programme (CAMP)*, 2008, p. 18.

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